

live well, work well

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Prescription Drug Abuse

A growing concern

Most Americans faithfully take their prescription medications as directed, but what happens when a patient finds it too difficult to stop taking the medication? Even worse, what about when prescriptions are deliberately taken for recreational purposes?

Epidemic on the Rise

According to a 2008 study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 15.2 million Americans age 12 and older had taken a prescription pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant, or sedative for nonmedical purposes at least once in the year prior to being surveyed. A 2009 study reports that of the top 10 drugs used by high school seniors, seven are prescription or over-the-counter medications such as cough syrup. Over half of those who used prescription drugs got them from family or friends.

Drugs of Choice

The NIDA reports that the three classes of prescription drugs most commonly abused are opioids, most often

prescribed for pain; central nervous system (CNS) depressants (such as tranquilizers and sedatives), for anxiety and sleep disorders; and stimulants, used to treat narcolepsy and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Effects on the Body

Each class of drugs affects the brain and body differently:

Opioids – When used correctly, they attach to opioid receptors, blocking the perception of pain. However, opioids such as OxyContin can also induce euphoria by affecting the brain regions that produce what is perceived as pleasure. This sensation is what causes people to become addicted. Short-term medical use of opioids rarely causes addiction. However, long-term users of the drug can experience severe respiratory depression which can lead to death.

CNS depressants – There are numerous CNS depressants, and most act by affecting the neurotransmitter called gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA). These drugs increase GABA activity, which produces a calming effect that is helpful

to those suffering from sleep or anxiety disorders. If one uses the drugs long-term due to addiction, the body will develop a tolerance and larger doses will be needed to produce the same results.

Stimulants – Once used to treat asthma and other respiratory problems, stimulants are now only prescribed for a treatment of a few conditions, due to their high abuse rate. Users experience a feeling of euphoria due to the increase of dopamine in the brain. Taking a high dose of a stimulant can result in a dangerously high body temperature, irregular heartbeat, cardiovascular failure or lethal seizures.



Causes

Experts are not entirely sure why prescription drug abuse continues to grow, but most agree that it is likely the availability of these medications. Doctors are writing prescriptions more than ever, and online pharmacies make it easy to obtain medications, even without a prescription.

Warning Signs

Unfortunately, many times abuse of prescription drugs is difficult to spot until a person is already deep into an addiction. Doctors may even have a hard time telling the difference between someone who is truly in extreme pain and a person who is just trying to get high. However, prescription drug abuse is likely present if a person exhibits the following signs:

- Receiving prescriptions from multiple doctors
- Stealing or forging prescriptions
- Constantly “misplacing” prescriptions so that more must be written
- Taking higher doses than recommended
- Buying medication from another person
- Selling prescriptions

Treatment and Prevention

Years of research have shown that addiction to any drug – illicit or prescribed – is a brain

disease that can be treated effectively. No single type of treatment is appropriate for everyone. Successful treatment methods have included detoxification, counseling, and pharmacological therapies.

While addictive behavior cannot always be prevented, there are some ways to be vigilant about staying on track with your prescriptions:

- Always follow medication directions carefully.
- Do not increase or decrease doses without first talking to your doctor.
- Do not stop taking medication on your own.
- Do not crush or break pills.
- Be clear about the drug’s effect on driving and other daily tasks.
- Learn about the drug’s potential side effects and interactions with alcohol and other medications.
- Inform your doctor if you have a past history of substance abuse.
- Do not use other people’s prescriptions, and never share yours.
- Contact your doctor *immediately* if you feel you are becoming excessively dependent on the drug.

You can also help those who are addicted by following the federal prescription drug disposal guidelines:

- Take unused, unneeded, or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers.
- Mix the drugs with an undesirable substance like used coffee grounds and put them in nondescript containers like sealable bags, then throw in the trash.
- Flush prescription drugs down the toilet *only* if the accompanying patient information specifically instructs it is safe to do so.
- Return unused, unneeded or expired prescription drugs to pharmaceutical “take-back” locations that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for safe disposal.

Getting Help

If you or someone you know may be suffering from prescription drug abuse, contact the Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator at **800-662-HELP** to find a substance abuse facility in your state.

Sources: Food and Drug Administration (FDA), National Institute on Drug Abuse, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research

Did you know...?

Cough syrup is also a drug of choice for addicts, and it is even more readily available over-the-counter. Youths ages 12 to 17 are the primary abusers. The suppressant dextromethorphan (DXM) produces mind-altering effects, but when taken in excess, it can cause numbness, nausea or vomiting, increased heart rate and blood pressure, or even brain damage.